

## A Modern Rendition of a Pre-modern Scenario

### *Imperfect Institutions and Obscured Vulnerabilities*

▼ **KEYWORDS** Epidemics, institutions, vulnerability, inequality

▼ **ABSTRACT** In recent decades, the West has appeared almost 'invincible' when faced with the threat of exogenous environmental or biological shocks. In accordance with traditional modernity narratives, infectious diseases particularly seemed to belong to either the premodern world or a contemporary 'underdeveloped' world. Now that the West is in the full grip of a pandemic, however, it has become increasingly difficult to uphold the same modern/non-modern dichotomy. Moreover, the arrival of COVID-19 in Western countries has been characterised as a consequence of institutional failure or at least an omen of future structural institutional change. These institutions, however, are known to have been designed for perpetuating the 'status quo' rather than protecting the societies they govern against environmental shocks. Accordingly, we argue that modern institutions should not be seen as smooth, hermetically sealed, protective systems, but rather as inherently uneven, imperfect structures whose imperfections come to the surface in times of crisis. That is to say that institutional systems may ultimately prove capable of withstanding environmental shocks, yet social groups and ecological systems may still remain vulnerable, raising questions with regard to theoretical frameworks and methodologies used by historians on this topic.

Bram Hilken, Bram van Besouw and Daniel R. Curtis • hilken@eshcc.eur.nl;  
besouw@eshcc.eur.nl; curtis@eshcc.eur.nl • Erasmus University Rotterdam

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## Introduction

Many Western governments were slow to implement institutional responses and legislative measures to the threat of COVID-19, as is now widely recognised by public health officials across various countries. Although ‘outbreak narratives’ – the fear of disease spread in one direction only from ‘marginalised’, ‘deviant’ or ‘underdeveloped’ groups to ‘native’, ‘mainstream’, or ‘developed’ society (Wald, 2008) – have been prevalent in Western media and popular culture for a long time, the chances of an outbreak actually occurring across large parts of Western Europe were not seen as realistic. Indeed, from its early emergence, COVID-19 was Orientalised as a ‘Chinese phenomenon’ – a moral judgement on a society based around concepts of degeneration, decay and insalubriousness (with special scrutiny for the wet-market concept: Lynteris, 2016), and thus an ‘underdevelopment’ narrative. Yet perhaps paradoxically, this was simultaneously accompanied by moralizing concerns connected to ‘over-development’, with Western anxieties over rapid social and economic changes occurring in a Chinese context where this transformation is not straightforwardly transparent to the outsider (Lynteris, 2018: 52). Accordingly, this established a narrative of development and modernisation left unchecked and encroaching upon the ‘natural’ environment – a liminal state where ‘old’ and ‘new’ collide – and thus creating conditions conducive for a newly emerging virus to take root. Meanwhile, such a virus working its way around Western European populations was apparently unthinkable in the context of the trust put in ‘modern’ and efficient institutions, emerging from its ‘democratic’ and ‘open’ societies. Put simply, epidemics seemed to belong either to the ‘premodern’ or the ‘developing’ world – or in the case of China a world seen to be out of kilter with its environment – and accordingly, the fact that COVID-19 took root and rapidly proliferated in Europe was difficult to accept for many of its inhabitants and governments.

The discrepancy of a perceivably ‘modern’ society dealing with a ‘premodern’ issue in the form of a pandemic has encouraged historians to provide their take on this global process; even arguing for a more prominent place in the discussion on government policies of prevention and recovery (de Graaf et al., 2020). As argued recently, however, it might be much more useful for historians to take the pandemic as an opportunity for investigating the workings of institutions during crises, rather than predicting contemporary institutional behaviour by consulting the past (Curtis and van Besouw, 2020). We argue that ‘the institutions’ of present-day Western societies are, in fact, supposed to efficiently guide everyday-life rather than protect us from uncommon crises. In addition, these institutions are so multifaceted that generic claims of ‘institutional failure’ or ‘institutional change’ lack analytical value.

Based on these insights, we suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic poses several challenges to how we as historians have come to think about institutions and the way we analyse them. Instead of understanding institutions as rigid systems smoothing everyday life for its subjects – thus either failing to do so,

or standing on the verge of fundamental change in case of an environmental or biological shock – this paper suggests that institutions were never tight, rigid, waterproof safeguards of society, but rather uneven, imperfect organisations whose flaws became more clearly exposed with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic on its soil.

## Institutions and Systemic Resilience

It might be tempting to characterize the arrival of COVID-19 in the ‘developed’ world as a prominent example of institutional failure or the harbinger of institutional change. However, such views reflect a certain misunderstanding of institutional functioning and their very ontology, as they depict the institutions governing societies as a protective force, either from above or from below. Instead, following the consensus definition, institutions are the often embedded formal and informal behavioural rules and organisations governing interactions among people (North, 1990: 3; Allen, 2012: 25). Indeed, institutions can be understood as a *system* organizing the way people live together, and as such, they reflect an ideological reality in addition to a physical one. Institutional bodies, then, such as the state or the market economy, are the closest thing to the physical manifestation of institutions, expressed in organisations and practices that govern processes of societal coexistence. At the same time, even such encompassing and visible institutions operate in tandem with a plethora of other institutions, both formal and informal, tangible and vague, comprehensive and marginal. In this paper, we mostly focus on the interplay between formal institutions and social practices, as formal institutions can steer certain directions and outcomes which in turn can be negotiated or outrightly rejected by such practices. To be sure, as we elaborate upon in the next paragraphs, this kind of understanding of institutions implies distinguishing between the systematic functioning of institutions on the one hand, and society on the other.

Regarding institutions as complex systematic sets of rules and societal organisation offers problems in relation to frameworks of resilience and vulnerability. Tim Soens argued on the basis of premodern floods in the North Sea area that concepts of systemic survival, failure or collapse often obscure more accurate representations and understanding of coping practices, hardship and vulnerability of individual agents. Indeed, in the resilience and vulnerability framework, it has long been accepted that the only way a system can be vulnerable is for it to collapse (Soens, 2018). It is, however, much likelier for systems to survive repeat hazards and even unexpected shocks (through absorption, adaptation, or transformation) than to collapse under their influence. Furthermore, the stronger a system is ingrained – reflected by widespread acceptance of the status quo and a certain self-evidence in the reproduction of this system – the easier its job is to sustain itself. All cogs work to keep the system in place and, as even historians such as Walter Scheidel

and Guido Alfani – both known for putting epidemics on the map as drivers of societal change – have stressed in recent publications (Scheidel, 2020; Hartog, 2020; Alfani, 2020a), it takes a very specific set of circumstances for such a system to collapse. In that sense, perhaps ironically, it is unlikely for the ‘Corona Crisis’ to become the much-prophesized ‘great leveller’.

If frameworks of vulnerability and resilience, then, prove inadequate for illustrating institutional performance, it could be said that national and international institutions were not just ‘unprepared’ to face a pandemic – they were simply never designed to do so. This is reflected in awkward short-term reactions to the pandemic. Until the Dutch government settled on full reliance on its public health institution, it was mostly uncertain in which measures to take, creating a backlog in implementing any such measures. When Germany was faced with its first COVID-19 victims, its forensic institutions had no procedures for dissecting disease-related bodies and dissection was in fact initially discouraged by the national public health institute, whose advice was subsequently rejected by forensic investigators (Püschel and Aepfelbacher, 2020). As in premodern times, many countries have faced issues with the logistics of removing corpses, as the existing procedures are unfit for dealing with surging death rates (Shankar, 2020). *The Economist* has recently pleaded for the installation of global institutions monitoring and preventing infectious diseases (*The Economist*, 2020). It is almost as though epidemics had completely vanished from collective institutional and cultural memory through conceived lack of necessity, and only now the West seems to align the non-modern scenario of a pandemic with modern institutional behaviour.

## **Resilience, Vulnerability, and Epidemics in Historical Research**

One of the issues regarding the assumed invincibility of North-Western European societies is the rigidity of systematic modernity thinking. Economic history – most notably global economic history – has been overflowing with assumptions on Western modernity and Europe’s long-lasting leading position in the world. Joel Mokyr famously attributed the rise of Europe to the Scientific Revolution, accrediting Europe’s ‘counting, categorisation and cataloguing’ – in other words, the ‘European tradition’ of attempting to understand the natural world systematically – as the beacons of European prosperity (2005: 289). The COVID-19 pandemic makes it all too clear that Mokyr’s three C’s may provide structure and intelligibility to our lived experiences – it can even be said that it helped streamline many processes, polishing man-made systems inspiring efficiency and growth. But the natural world, of which we are very much still part, is still one of messiness, and our governmental, economic, social, and scientific institutions are still, in spite of their successes, no more than frameworks through which the world functions. Although such Western modernity narratives have been challenged

for decades, a deep-rooted narrative of Europe's Enlightenment paving a road that logically results into prosperity, freedom, and safety has been, one could say, resilient in the face of most critiques.

On the specific topic of epidemics, historians have tended to fall into the same grand narrative trap, favouring statements that prove epidemics to set in motion one thing or another, pushing society down a certain path, with which historians undermine the 'lumpiness' of (historical) reality, and therefore effectively undoing one of their greatest strengths. Diseases – sometimes working in conjunction with other environmental or climatic pressures – have been held responsible for the decline of empires (Harper, 2017), transition of economies of entire world regions (Campbell, 2016; Voigtländer and Voth, 2013), or the reversal of economic fortunes between regions (Alfani, 2013; Pamuk, 2007). Perhaps this is unsurprising, given the central place of the Black Death in the historiography of epidemics which has tended to emphasize this plague as a 'watershed moment' that precipitated radical and lasting changes within economy, society, politics, health and culture (Cohn, 2002; 2006; Campbell, 2016: criticised recently in Geltner, 2020: 4–5). Yet it must be noted that the evidence on these egalitarian effects are on one hand often ambiguous (see, for instance, the critique of real wages as a straightforward index for living standards: Hatcher, 2018) and on the other hand misrepresented through focus on certain forms of measurement, presenting the idea of epidemics as instigating or accelerating societal transitions.

Thus, for example, overemphasis on the aggregate survival of institutional and societal systems framed as 'resilience' – or, through lack thereof, as failure or collapse – has obscured hardships and suffering 'on the ground' dictated by a hidden layer of vulnerability (van Bavel et al., 2020). Similar sentiments could be expressed with regard to recent historical studies on post-hazard or post-epidemic redistribution of resources, where Gini coefficients have been produced showing how, for example, plague mortality affects the distribution of property or wealth towards either increased or decreased inequality, but only at the aggregated level of the region or locality (many of those empirical studies summarised in Scheidel, 2017; and more recently in Nigro, 2020). It is clear that such measures, although valuable for discerning general trends in preindustrial inequality and between-region comparison, obscure other forms of entrenched inequality leading to societal vulnerabilities that exist beneath the basic numbers, particularly when it comes to disruptive events like epidemic outbreaks.

The question then rises: what are we actually measuring when performing these calculations? How much of societal vulnerability are we capturing? What does a Gini coefficient in wealth distribution say about female capacity to secure welfare or protection in the aftermath of a hazard or crisis (Ogilvie, 2020)? Indeed, how many studies into post-hazard economic inequality in recent years have incorporated sex-disaggregated information? Furthermore, how are the elderly or minors or disabled members of a community catered for? What do fluctuations of Gini coefficients imply in terms of social mobility and the life

chances of the young? Fragmentation of property into the hands of grateful heirs might mean little if those same people face broader social inequalities driven by prejudice and persecution – elements which sometimes are ignited down different lines of gender, socio-economic status, insider-outsider status, and race and ethnicity during epidemic outbreaks (Cohn, 2018). Does the perception of the poor – and conceptions of fairness and equity – mirror potentially fluctuating trends in the distribution of economic resources? Such questions remain hidden beneath aggregate numbers and conceptual focus on disease as watershed moments, while they may provide more insightful answers in terms of the social and economic effects of epidemics.

Other issues remain important when looking at the redistributive effects of epidemics and their consequences for societal vulnerability. Epidemics may lead to fragmentation or consolidation of estates through inheritance or the land market, but not all premodern communities drew their welfare from private property markets – instead the access of individuals and households to collective and common resources seemed of higher importance (although they sometimes mirrored private property inequalities: Curtis, 2016a). Sometimes it was not the distribution of wealth *per se* that changed after hazards and crises, but the precise composition of wealth – with some wealth such as land, produce or money more visible than other forms of wealth obscured from view such as investments in financial packages – with obvious implications for measurements of redistributive effect (Zuijderduijn and De Moor, 2013). It should also be noted that in some cases, large amounts of resources – wealth and property – within a region went unrecorded, or rather untaxed, due to aristocratic or ecclesiastical privileges.

Another question raised with regard to redistribution in the aftermath of epidemics relates to the poor propertyless – how do those that are often left off of the fiscal registers (that comprises much of the underlying source material from which the Gini coefficients are composed) fare? Particularly given the importance of the propertyless in the ‘great leveller’ thesis – the combination of rising real wages and land abundance is argued to provide propertyless survivors to acquire newly available land with newly raised wages (Scheidel, 2017: 297–298) – it seems to be a worthwhile exercise to examine fluctuations of the propertyless over time. It has been argued that truly propertyless households often make up such a small percentage of the total that, if taken into the calculation, they should steer the results towards slightly higher inequality and thus confirming the long-term trend, or hardly affect the trend at all (Alfani, 2020b: 22, based on cases in Italy and Germany for which propertyless numbers were available, or where they were able to be calculated). But even if the propertyless are small in numbers, the more important question is whether the share of propertyless is stable over time, especially in the face of social upheaval. Moreover, the point is to look beyond larger trends and investigate how economic effects of epidemic mortality shape people’s lives in socioeconomic terms. That is to say an increased focus on the top wealth decile has definite uses for distilling distribution numbers,

but a sharper look at specific property attainment – particularly for those previously excluded from property markets – may show the more interesting changes ‘on the ground’.

Tenure also remains a complex issue to integrate. Post-hazard inequalities at the ‘owner level’ have been shown to exist simultaneously with egalitarian tendencies and greater access to secure property at the user level via various forms of long-term hereditary lease (Curtis, 2016b). How do we assess tendencies such as increased equality in the distribution of wealth after the Black Death in certain localities within the Florentine *contado*, when at the same time, other scholars have pointed to the entrenchment and proliferation of sharecropping farms worked under very inequalitarian and onerous terms and conditions (van Besouw, 2019; Curtis, 2020)? It should also be noted that not all conditions of inequality created conditions of immense hardship: large landowners such as manorial lords, aristocrats and ecclesiastical institutions sometimes had paternalistic duties of care and welfare to weaker members of society (Van Onacker, 2019), even if this was sometimes born out of self-interest – for example, not wanting to find new tenants, or putting down the seeds of social unrest. Put simply, how do we incorporate all these developments and nuances into our measurements of the discernible effects of epidemics on welfare? Indeed, what is the value of precise observations of post-epidemic redistribution – for example, in the form of Gini coefficients – when the aim is to understand and track the underlying ‘real’ inequalities? More importantly, how can we augment current measures to incorporate changes in structural inequalities?

To summarise, measurements of post-epidemic redistribution have tended to overly stress singular economic effects of mortality, essentially pointing towards overall structures – such as inequality as measured through Gini coefficients – that say rather little about actual mechanisms of post-epidemic redistribution. Much of the historical evidence itself remains ambiguous and inconclusive. For example, a perceived rise in real wages in the late Middle Ages after the Black Death has been debated by questioning the assumed number of average working days per year for certain social groups and occupations (Hatcher, 2018). Elsewhere, Gini coefficients said to measure wealth inequality do not necessarily explain the precise composition of that inequality – indeed, property may well change hands between family members who already had similar levels of access to that same property. Furthermore, the explanation of the evidence tends to stress aspects that overlook general tendencies of continuity. For example, there has been significant focus on the dip in wealth inequality in the direct aftermath of the 1629–1630 Ivrea plague outbreak, while hardly referring to the fact that inequality levels recovered very rapidly or that the extent of the dip was not particularly large in the first place (Alfani, 2010a; 2010b). This kind of presentation of the evidence has helped steering the discipline of historical research into epidemics towards the idea that significant spiked excess mortality has the ability to fundamentally transform societal structures through demographic fluctuations



influencing simple economic mechanisms of supply and demand. Put simply, epidemics obviously have social and economic effects, but we should also reflect upon the likelihood that these tend to only affect societies briefly and contingently, and as a result, challenge us to ask deeper questions beyond the aggregate numbers, as laid out above.

## Conclusion

Overall, we make a case for shifting away from a rigid view of institutions safeguarding systems by whose grace modern life can be safely and prosperously led – something completely exposed by the processes connected to COVID-19 in the West. – Rather than predicting structural change or characterising modern institutions as failing to stand up to the task, it may be more apt to refer to the imperfections of these systems as ‘holes’ in resilient phenomena, leaving particular groups vulnerable. Through the COVID-19 pandemic the next few years may bring similar rethinking on the criteria seen to be most relevant and foregrounded when addressing epidemics (and other hazards) further back in the past in historical research. Are our measurements of resilience and inequality at all meaningful, and more to the point, to what extent and precisely how do institutions play a role here? Indeed, it has been suggested that institutions during and in the aftermath of hazards were controlled and dictated by an uneven array of social interest groups, resulting in outcomes for their own benefit or to reinforce a ‘status quo’ (van Bavel, 2016). Accordingly, ‘control’ of these institutions is seen as the essence of social vulnerability, predicated on the back of unequal distribution of resources. Although logical, another point of view could suggest that the real essence of coping capacity lies with those agents and actors with little or no power or control over the precise mechanisms guiding institutions – and little capacity to access the resources, protection and welfare supplied within these institutions – but instead were still able to circumvent, negotiate or avoid the formalised layer of institutional options thus resorting to various forms of rule breaking, foot-dragging and passive resistance. Those individuals and groups who had greater scope for circumvention, were those that coped most effectively. The difficulty for the historian, of course, is that much of this remains obscured from view and out of the eye of the documentary record, and the challenge remains to find ways to bring these hardships and burdens to the surface.

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## About the Authors

**Bram Hilken** is a PhD candidate at the Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication. His work is mainly concerned with the redistributive effects of epidemic mortality; **Bram van Besouw** is postdoctoral researcher at Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication; **Daniel R. Curtis** is an associate professor working at Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication, and is a co-author of the 2020 book 'Disasters and History: The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies' with Cambridge University Press.